

VZCZCXRO7795
PP RUEHAG RUEHROV
DE RUEHDM #0149 0451513
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 141513Z FEB 07
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2971
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0326
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000149

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR WALLER; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/13/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: BACKGROUND ON JANUARY PRISON RIOT IN SYRIA

REF: A. DAMASCUS 0042

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 0134

Classified By: A/DCM William Roebuck, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: According to numerous Embassy sources, imprisoned members of President Asad's extended family began an uprising in Adra'a prison January 25 over the fact they were not included in the Eid al-Adha Presidential amnesty (ref A). Eventually, the Army had to be called in to quell the riot. In the aftermath, prison officials imposed harsh punishment on the prison population. Prominent political dissident and human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni was beaten in the wake of the prison riot. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) The notorious Adra'a prison just outside Damascus is home to both criminal and political prisoners and it is where, according to Amnesty International, prisoners, political and otherwise, are routinely tortured and beaten.

[1](#)3. (C) According to human rights lawyers (who made visits to their clients the week of January 28), jailed members of the Asad family began rioting at Adra'a on January 25 to protest their exclusion from the December 30 Presidential amnesty. (Note: It is widely believed in the Syrian human rights community that some members of the extended Asad family are heavily involved in criminal activity. The opinion of the opposition is that when Hafez al-Asad seized power, his brothers, Rifa'at and Jamil, took the opportunity to set up an extended criminal enterprise, focusing largely on smuggling. Today, Bashar Asad and the central government occasionally arrest some of the other Asads for these criminal activities. In such cases, the incarcerated Asads usually receive amnesty or reduced sentences, according to Embassy contacts in the human rights and civil society field. End Note.) The prison riot began in Wing 3 of Adra'a prison when a number of inmates, led by the Asad family members, began tearing apart their beds, breaking light bulbs, and setting fires. The rioters then barricaded themselves in the wing. Human rights lawyer, Rezan Zeitunah, who visited imprisoned human rights activist Anwar al-Bunni at Adra'a on January 31, told poloff that the Asads, who reportedly control the drug trade inside the prison, began to distribute drugs to other prisoners prior to the riot in an attempt to exacerbate the already tense atmosphere in the prison.

[1](#)4. (C) Afraid to confront Asad family members, prison police did nothing to stop the riot which led to it spreading to other wings of the prison, Zeitunah said. At this point, the Syrian Army as well as the Minister of the Interior and the

Chief Prosecutor were called in. According to Zeitunah, negotiations quickly broke down and the Army fired tear gas into the prison wings and then forcibly put down the uprising, beating many prisoners in process.

¶15. (C) Over the ensuing days, retribution came swift and hard from prison authorities. Zeitunah and fellow activist and writer Ikram al-Bunni said that prison guards administered beatings to the criminal prisoners at random, regardless of whether or not they participated in the riot. Initially, political prisoners were exempted from the beatings. After imprisoned human rights activist Anwar al-Bunni began to protest vocally against the harsh treatment of the other prisoners, Bunni himself was beaten and had his head shaved as punishment for having objected to the treatment of other prisoners, according to his brother and Zeitunah. (Note: Despite the dismal reputation of the prison, or perhaps because of it, al-Thawra, an official Syrian daily, published an investigative report on January 21 that "attested to" the benign and humane conditions at Adra,a, comparing it to the four-star Meridien Hotel in downtown Damascus.)

¶16. (C) Comment: This is the first time in recent memory that Post has heard about a riot at Adra,a prison. We reported in ref B how the riot and its aftermath caused prison authorities to include Kamal Labwani among those punished after the riot. End Comment.

CORBIN